

Dr Evan Thomas: A Tribute



Members of Robb College during the late 1970s and early 1980s were saddened to learn of the passing of Dr Evan Thomas on 10th July 2019, after a long struggle with health and mobility complications of diabetes. Robb Foundation Chair, Geoff Perry, asked me to write a tribute to Evan that can be accessed by all those who knew Evan and by current JCR and SCR Members. It is a great honour to try.

Any tribute to Evan inevitably includes his wife of almost 35 years, Tineke, and their daughters Marieke and Annemieke, whose unwavering love and constant care enabled Evan to live at home and continue to cherish every minute of family life, despite declining health and mobility in recent years.

Evan and Tineke met in the Solomon Islands, where Evan worked from 1972-1978 as Chief Education Officer, Selection and Guidance, within the Ministry of Education and Culture. Given his outstanding background as a rugby player and coach during his university and earlier professional career in Auckland, and his prowess as a team coach, Evan became National Director of Coaching and sole Selector of the Solomon Islands Rugby Union Squad. He also played cricket and captained the Solomon Islands Cricket XI.

Following an invitation to Evan from the Head of Curriculum Studies at the UNE, Evan and Tineke came to Armidale in 1979, enabling Evan to undertake a Ph.D. and to teach Curriculum Studies within the Faculty of Education, and Tineke to pursue a B.A. degree. Given Evan's long and successful record as a Rugby Union player and coach, and Tineke's incredible organisational and playing abilities in a variety of women's sports, Evan and Tineke were prevailed upon to become Resident Fellows of Robb College – positions they filled with great distinction from 1979 until 1984.

Inter alia, Evan coached the Robb College First XV Rugby squad and, in addition, provided counselling and guidance to Robb students. Tineke acted as Mary Bagnall Women's Sports Coordinator throughout their Robb College years – a period when Robb College dominated inter-collegiate sports. One of Evan's proudest achievements was coaching the Robb College First XV to win the NE Zone Premiership in 1983. The 1983 Grand Final played against Armidale City was closely contested, with City's team including former Wallabies, John Hipwell and Greg Cornelson, and NSW Country representative, Charles Belfield. Evan also served as coach of the New England squad, Director of Coaching, and Chairman of Selectors for NSW Rugby Union.

Evan completed a Ph.D. at UNE entitled *Changes to the Secondary School Curriculum in the Solomon Islands 1973-1983* under the supervision of Dr Robert Baker. Robert and his wife, Dr Carolyn Baker, were active in the SCR and respected advisors to many Robb College students.

Evan and Tineke both made outstanding contributions to the College. For example, in August-September 1981, Evan and Tineke both took leave from their respective duties to lead the Northern Running Team throughout the entire 24 days on the road, as part of the ambitious 1981 Robb College / Rotary / Prudential 'Cape-to-Cape Run'. Accompanied by their dog, Windje, Evan and Tineke provided leadership, representation and coordination of the Northern Team's runners all the way from Mossman on Cape-York Peninsula back to Armidale.

In brief, the two Robb / Rotary / Prudential 'Cape-to-Cape Run' team runners covered a combined distance of 4,465 km (N. Team 2,557 km; S. Team, 1,908 km) between 21st August and 13th September, 1981, running relay-style for 24 days on the road: the Northern Team from Cape Tribulation (Cape York), hosted by Mossman Rotary Club and thereafter by Rotary Clubs in towns along the route back to Armidale; and the Southern Team from Wilson's Promontory, Victoria, hosted initially by the Rotary Club of Foster and thereafter by Rotarians in the communities along the inland route back to Armidale.

In combination, the two teams and commercial sponsors raised \$80,000, of which \$20,000 were costs, and \$60,000 was deposited with the UNE as Trustee to create and support an ongoing 'Foundation for Disabled Students' as Robb College's International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) 1981 Project. The

impetus for the Project came from the need to raise funds for essential disabled access work at Robb College (study-bedroom / bathroom, automated access doors, ramps etc.) to enable a wheel-chair-dependent prospective student to live at the College from 1982, in order to complete a B.A. degree; and also to address other access needs of disabled students on the UNE campus.

Evan's and Tineke's faith in the C-to-C Run as a worthwhile Project to gain widespread visibility to stimulate future enrolments and collegiate morale helped ensure its success. Tineke also worked very closely with Robb's first female JCR President (1981) and later Resident Fellow, Fay Stewart, and took an active part in the 1984 six-team 'Run-for-Your-Life' Project – a combined Robb / St Albert's Project, coordinated by Fay and Peter Cunich of Albies – that raised \$120,000 for cancer research and community awareness. An annual JCR charitable Project continues as a feature of College life, providing students with significant logistic and personal challenges, while generating goodwill towards the College and the UNE.

Evan and Tineke contributed much more to Robb than sporting leadership. Both shared their infectious enthusiasm for all aspects of collegiate life. Evan and Tineke led by example to illustrate a shared belief that if we elect to participate in something, we must give it our best efforts and strive for excellence. Evan's abiding legacy to all the Robb men who played rugby included his encouragement to strive academically, professionally, personally and collegially, as well as giving 100% commitment to sporting activities.

Evan even managed to persuade the rugby men to give their best at College cultural and formal events. At the 1984 Robb College Graduation Dinner, when

I happened to be overseas in Mauritius, I have it on good authority from impeccable (anonymous) sources that the men's singing of the traditional, light-hearted graduation hymn "Gaudeamus Igitur" ("So Let Us Rejoice"), was much more robust and rousing in those verses wishing long life to young, carefree and beautiful women scholars ("Vivant omnes virgines, Facilies, formosae"), than when wishing long life to the university and those who taught in it ("Vivat academia, vivant professorres, Vivat membrum quodlibet, Vivat membra quaelibet, Semper sint in flore"). In defence of the Grad Dinner processions of 1984, we must remember that the words of "Gaudeamus Igitur" are reputedly traced to a Latin manuscript from 1287, so we might expect that its translations from Latin today might be more flexible, subject to closer scrutiny, and we would all question some of the underlying sentiments. Nevertheless, Evan's proteges did him proud in 1984 and carried this energy over to Robb's 1985 successful production of the musical, "Guys and Dolls" directed by Peter Hall and starring our own Geoff Perry.

Tineke became a legend of sporting excellence during her six years at Robb College. Excelling at all sports, Tineke led Robb women in Mary Bagnall Trophy events and local sports teams. In the tradition applying during Evan's and Tineke's time at Robb College, at weekly formal dinners, as part of the Sports Officer's Report, members of every successful MB or PT sporting team, local competition winners and those selected for UNE or other representative honours were awarded an embossed 'Robb College Sporting Excellence' high-ball glass. Before leaving College in late 1984, having been awarded a massive total of 85 'Sporting Excellence' glasses during her six years of contributions, members of Robb College presented Tineke with a gold goblet in case she felt

like drinking from something else for a change. This record for women's sporting contributions to Robb College is unlikely to ever be equalled or eclipsed.

Evan and Tineke moved to Canberra in 1985 and were there until 1991. Their two daughters were born in Canberra: Marieke in 1989 and Annemieke in 1990. Evan was Head of Curriculum and Staff Development at Canberra Institute of Technology. He continued to coach rugby and re-kindled his love of recreational fishing. Tineke served as Secretary to the Head, Marketing and Public Relations of the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and remained very active in sports, despite her increasing domestic and family responsibilities.

From 1991 to 2007, Evan, Tineke and their daughters lived in Windhoek, Namibia. Reflecting Tineke's Dutch heritage, Marieke and Annemieke showed great flair for languages and became fluent in English, Dutch and Afrikaans. Evan established the Namibian Qualifications Authority as a major contribution while serving as Chief Advisor, Qualifications, within the Ministry of Higher Education, Vocational Training, Science and Technology. Evan coached the University of Namibia Rugby Team, and based on their premiership success, he was appointed Coach of the Namibian National Rugby Team that has now participated in three Rugby World Cups. From 1996, Evan set up his own successful HR consulting business, and in 2000, was appointed as the Honorary NZ Consul in Namibia – a position he held with distinction until 2007, when the family moved back to NZ, mainly to give their daughters better opportunities.

Since 2007, Evan, Tineke, Marieke and Annemieke have lived in Auckland, NZ – Evan's old stomping ground – where they have enjoyed the companionship of extended family and friends, more educational, social and employment

opportunities, great spots for Evan to go fishing at, and, as Evan's diabetes-related health challenges increased, ready access to high-quality, affordable health care.

The Robb community persuaded Evan and Tineke to visit Sydney for a 25-year Reunion of the 1983 Robb First XV Premiership team, held on 2nd August 2008 at the Mantra Restaurant, Woolloomooloo Wharf. Good friends who played in the Premiership team and the same group 25 years later are easily recognisable.





The 25th Anniversary Reunion provided an ideal occasion for all present to offer tributes to Evan and Tineke for their leadership and friendship.

Since 2008, some of Evan's former proteges have kept in touch with Evan and Tineke. For their parts, Tineke, Marieke and Annemieke have been dedicated to keeping Evan as active as feasible, with Tineke shouldering the increasing challenges of Evan's full-time care with unqualified devotion. Evan and Tineke enthusiastically welcomed Marieke's husband Matt into their family and are delighted that Marieke is close to completing her studies and residency requirements to practice as a Medical Doctor. Annemieke holds a responsible position with Auckland Transport, and, having always adored Evan as her father and champion, is finding life without her loving Dad very tough.

A 2017 picture of the Thomas family was sent to me as a reasonably recent picture of the family taken outside their home in Remuera.



Evan's family and friends have been devastated since his peaceful death on Wednesday 10th July, just a few months short of his 83rd birthday, and Tineke and Evan's 35th wedding anniversary. At the Memorial Service for Evan held in Auckland on Monday 15th July, wonderful, sometimes witty, but always heartfelt tributes from former Robb colleagues and students were read to the large gathering, each speaker and message giving thanks for the contributions Evan had made to their lives. Although Evan is no longer with us, we must keep his legacy alive and keep in regular touch with Tineke, whose contact details I would be pleased to provide, on request.

I am hopeful that Tineke and one or both of their daughters and son-in-law Matt, will soon be able to travel to Australia to visit former colleagues and friends. I am sure it would be greatly appreciated by Tineke and their daughters if those of us who interacted closely with Tineke and Evan during their years at Robb College could extend an invitation to visit some of the people and places that meant a great deal to them, and thereby help Tineke, Marieke, Matt and Annemieke to know that Evan will always have a special place in our hearts and minds.

I thank Evan for all he contributed to our lives. He will always be remembered.

Jim Irvine

Master, Robb College, 1981-1990

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